



Anshe Chesed Cemetery



The Jewish Faith in Vicksburg



Historians suggest that the first Jewish people settled in the area of Walnut Hills in 1821. By the time Vicksburg was incorporated in 1825, the Jewish population numbered around twenty families. These early settlers, and those who followed, came mainly from the Germanic lands of central and western Europe (Alsace-Lorraine, Baden and Bavaria), fleeing political and religious persecution and seeking new economic opportunities. Mostly peddlers by trade, Jewish merchants established themselves in Vicksburg, an area reminiscent of their homes along the Rhine, and contributed greatly to the area's importance as a leading trading and commercial center on the Mississippi River.

"Men of Kindness"

With strong attachment to their religion, these families at first conducted worship services in private homes, then later in larger halls of various buildings as their community grew. In 1841, the Jewish Congregation of Vicksburg was established and given the name "Anshe Chesed" (literally translated from Hebrew as "Men of Kindness").

The congregation was incorporated and chartered by the State of Mississippi in 1862 when the number of families had grown to more than fifty. Its founding and charter made Anshe Chesed a permanent part of the religious life of Vicksburg, although the building of a synagogue had to await the end of the Civil War and better times.

An Area of Heavy Fighting

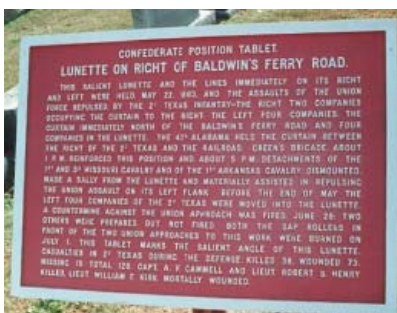


The pattern of Jewish communities in the United States indicated that in most cases, cemeteries for the burial of their dead were established even before a congregation for worship was founded. Therefore, it may be assumed that a Jewish Cemetery pre-dated the one now located at the end of Grove Street in Vicksburg. The location of this original cemetery is shrouded in vagueness and hearsay. While actual records are not available, it is believed that the earlier Jewish Cemetery was located at the corner of Zollinger Hill and Jackson Road, on land donated by Bernard Yoste, first president of the Anshe Chesed congregation.

Shortly thereafter, bodies were removed from the old cemetery and re-interred. The first burial in the present cemetery most likely took place in May 1865, when a man named Mayer was buried in grave No. 1. This shows the cemetery's creation to be almost 40 years prior to the establishment of the Vicksburg National Military Park, which now surrounds the cemetery.

The tract of land where the Anshe Chesed cemetery is now located was once part of the Second Texas Lunette, an area of heavy fighting during the siege of Vicksburg. At that time, Baldwin Ferry Road, a key entrance into the city, passed through this parcel of land. Vivid descriptions of the battle for Vicksburg referring to the serious fighting in this area can be found in the official records. Troops engaged in this area included the 2nd Texas Infantry (CSA), and the 5th Iowa, 10th Iowa, and 99th Illinois Infantries (USA).

From available records, it appears that the current Anshe Chesed Cemetery came into being in 1864, when on August 23, the parcel of land was deeded to the Board of Trustees of Anshe Chesed Congregation for the purpose of establishing a burying ground for the benefit of its members and their families.



Jewish Soldiers in Gray



Philip Sartorius and his wife Sophie Rose (ca 1911)

Because of lack of antisemitism in Vicksburg, Jews were readily accepted into the community, and many fought for the Confederacy during the Civil War. One of the first Confederate soldiers to be wounded in the campaign for Vicksburg was a Jewish citizen. Bavarian-born Philip Sartorius was wounded at Milliken's Bend while in the 15th

Louisiana Battalion Cavalry, Co. A. His brother, Emanuel, was with the 26th or 27th Louisiana, and was wounded a few weeks later in the trenches on Washington Street in Vicksburg. The two brothers had come from Alsace-Lorraine in the 1830s, bringing with them a Torah still used today at the Anshe Chesed temple.

A Time of Growth and Affluence

Rabbi Bernard
H. Gotthelf



With the end of the Civil War, Vicksburg experienced new growth as a great river port and commercial center. The Jewish community grew both in numbers and affluence. As the Anshe Chesed congregation continued to grow, the need for a strong spiritual leader became apparent and a search was initiated. A very able rabbi, Bernard Henry Gotthelf, from Louisville, Kentucky, was offered, and accepted, the pulpit of Anshe Chesed. Interestingly enough, Rabbi Gotthelf had been the second Jewish Chaplain with the Union Forces in the Civil War. Trained in Germany, he fit in well with his new congregants in Vicksburg.

congregation of American Hebrew Congregations was founded in Cincinnati, Ohio, and one year later, Anshe Chesed of Vicksburg was admitted as a member of this group of congregations under the banner of Reform Judaism. The largest Jewish congregation in Mississippi, Anshe Chesed moved rapidly to adopt the changes of Reform Judaism. The pattern fit nicely with the growing assimilation of the community into the life and times of the city's population at large, and a proud and prosperous Jewish community greeted the turn of the century and years ahead.



Anshe Chesed Synagogue, 1905

To accommodate their growing numbers, the congregation purchased a lot on Cherry Street, between China and Clay Streets. In May of 1870, a magnificent Temple was completed and very elaborate dedicatory services held, attended by leading religious and political figures of the community and state, including the governor. This synagogue on Cherry Street served the Anshe Chesed congregation for a full century.

With few significant exceptions, however, Jews from Eastern Europe did not settle in Vicksburg in the great wave of immigration from 1880-1920. Perhaps it was the dwindling economic opportunities in the area, but more likely the Jewish immigrants preferred to be among like-minded kinsmen who followed the traditionalist (orthodox) religion and who were strongly Zionist. New immigrants who did settle in Vicksburg maintained their own worship service and took many years to become a part of the overall Jewish community.

Seeking social outlets for its youth, the affluent Jewish community in Vicksburg organized the Young Men's Hebrew Benevolent Association in 1871 (later to become the B'nai B'rith Literary Society). In 1892, a beautiful building was built on the corner of Clay and Walnut Streets to house this association, only to be destroyed by fire in 1915. Completely rebuilding the structure, the social life of the Jewish community continued there until the building was sold to the City of Vicksburg in 1967.

By the late 1960s, the once magnificent temple on Cherry Street had also fallen on hard times. A new temple was erected at the end of Grove Street on land adjoining the Jewish Cemetery and the Vicksburg National Military Park, and dedicated in 1970. Despite a steadily shrinking Jewish population over the years, the historical community remains proud of its past and holds hopes for a promising future.



First B'nai B'rith Literary
Association building, 1892-1915

Over time, however, traditional Judaism became increasingly difficult to observe in a community so far removed from the mainstream of Jewish life found in the U.S. cities of the East and the North. The spirit of reform was in the air among many of the German Jews in the United States and its impact reached the Anshe Chesed congregation in Vicksburg. In 1873, a Union



Anshe Chesed Synagogue, 2002